MERRILL

America and the Covenant

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BY

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AMERICA AND THE COVENANT.

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"We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves."

Those are good and necessary words. Every man or woman who would be a Christian must lay them to heart, and put them to practice.

But it is not with the application of this great law of Christian living to the conduct of individuals that we are concerned to-day. The question of immediate importance just at the present time is not the application of the principles of Jesus to the individual, but their application to groups. That is the point where the world challenges the authority of Christ. And to many Christians,—increasingly to the whole body of believers in the church,—it is becoming clear that the supremacy of Christ is threatened unless His reign is extended. Either He must be Lord of all, or He will not be Lord at all. If business men, and statesmen, and educators, and journalists, can leave Him out of their counsels, then His Gospel becomes mere embroidery on human life, when it should be the warp of its fabric, into which all the rest is woven, and by which all the rest is given substance.

I ask you to take this text then, not as a word for each of us individually, but as a word for that collective and beloved entity which we call "America". "America, being strong, ought to bear the burdens of the weaker peoples, and not to look out simply for her own interests."

The bearing of this message is clear, in view of the grave situation that is developing with regard to the proposed Covenant of the League of Nations. The time is coming soon, if it be not here already, when America, through her representatives, must decide whether to stand

by that Covenant or to reject it, to enter a partnership of nations or withdraw to a position and policy of isolation.

My purpose to-day is not to defend or to discuss the details of the Treaty or of the Covenant. I want to give a reason for the faith that is in me that the American course, the Christian course, the right course, is for our country to set her hand to the Covenant and take her place in the proposed partnership. It seems a proper subject for discussion on this day so close to the birthday of our American flag.

I concern myself now only with those reasons for supporting the Covenant which are so big, so vital, so Christian, that they have a right to a place in the thought and attention of the church. Arguments are being used against the adoption of the Covenant which have no standing or validity for a Christian nation. I want to plead that we be sure to give no weight to such arguments; that, if we feel constrained to oppose the Covenant, we at least do so on other grounds than these.

First of all, least important,—though not always least in weight and influence, come what we may call the personal motives for opposition. Strong as these may be, they are wholly unworthy of attention on the part of honorable and Christian men and women. There are some who oppose the League of Nations because the personality and conduct of President Wilson are intimately associated with it; because of the way in which it has been worked out, presented (thrust at us, they would say), by a group of interested men; because they assert that the Senate of the United States, a co-ordinate branch of the government in all treaty-making, has not been consulted as our Constitution provides that it shall be.

Grant, for argument's sake, that these objections rest on solid and incontrovertible fact; that Woodrow Wilson is all that his critics claim, or even worse (if that could

be); that the ignoring of those who had a right to be consulted is wholly indefensible; grant it all; and still there is one absolute, convincing, unanswerable reply; that in a matter so vital, so fraught with immense consequences for the future of the race, so intimately related to the welfare of humanity, it is unjustifiable to let any considerations have weight which do not affect the general welfare of humanity. It is utterly unworthy to allow one's judgment or action to be affected a hair's weight or a hair's breadth by any personal or partisan views. The only question that has the floor is the question, Will it be for the good of the world, or will it not, to set up such a League of Nations? Let a man be sure that he is free from any personal or partisan bias before he begins to throw stones at the Covenant.

A second set of objections which are unworthy and indefensible are those which spring from a misunderstanding of American principles and ideals.

During the long, honorable, and prosperous course of our national history, we have been guided by certain great statements given to our nation at critical times by the leaders God sent her. Conspicuous among these are Washington's Farewell Address to the American People, on retiring from the Presidency, and Monroe's Message in which is set forth the celebrated doctrine which bears his name. It is not to be wondered at, it is rather to be expected and desired, that Americans should turn to these classic words for guidance, when new occasions call for decisive action.

There is no objection to the League of Nations voiced more commonly or vigorously than the allegation that it controverts the advice of Washington and the position taken by President Monroe. This would not of itself be absolutely decisive against the new plan, for the world does move, and new occasions do teach new duties. America must never be steered by dead hands, even if they be the hands of Washington, Monroe, and Lincoln.

Yet it would rightly give us pause if the proposition that America enter a partnership of nations clearly ran counter to the express advice of the Father of our Country. It is not strange that many are disturbed when they recall the phrase "entangling alliances", and the warning against them, and then read the proposals for bringing America into intimate and practically inescapable relations—entangling relations—with the nations of Europe and Asia.

But all I ask, as an ardent supporter of the Covenant, is that every American shall read for himself that great Farewell Address of Washington, and decide for himself whether it can rightfully be invoked against our participation in the proposed covenant of Nations. Careful study of the document reveals the fact that Washington based his solemn advice that America play a lone hand on certain plain facts, *not one of which has kept its validity to the present day,* while one of them at least, and that the strongest, makes for rather than against our participation in a commonwealth of nations.

There are five reasons Washington gives as making wise a policy of isolation, and freedom from alliances with European powers.

The first reason is the weakness of the United States as a new and small nation, which might easily be overmatched and controlled by the great power.

Is there any one in America who will assert that that reason holds to-day? Are we so weak and small that we are afraid to mingle with the rest of the world? Why the very men who invoke Washington's advice, some of them, are most given to boasting of America's greatness and power. This reason, cogent in the days of George Washington, has simply ceased to exist. We need say no more about it.

The second reason is the geographical location of our country, remote from Europe, separated by a vast ocean, and so naturally set to live a separate life.

Does that reason still hold, in these times when steamships cross the ocean in five days, and airships in a single day, while wires and wireless apparatus make the thinking of the world simultaneous, and New York is as instantly aware of what is done in London as Paris is? One goes from New York to Liverpool, under ordinary conditions to-day, in just about one-half the time it took George Washington, under ordinary conditions, to go from Mt. Vernon to New York. This reason has also ceased to exist.

The third reason brought forward by Washington was the aloofness of the United States of America from the political and general interests of Europe. We were living in a new and a different world. Our interests were not theirs, nor theirs our. It would be unnatural and forced for us to attempt to play any part in the common life of European nations.

True in Washington's day, will any one claim that that is fact to-day? Are our interests remote from those of Europe? If so, why was it so impossible, so wrong, for the United States to attempt to remain neutral during this great European war? I am sure that the reason and conscience of every man responded vigorously when the President said, at the time when we were just entering the war, that it was plain that never again could we attempt to be neutral in any world conflict. There were different worlds in Washington's day; the world is one to-day. Our interests, political, social, economic, are inextricably entangled with those of the other great nations.

At the famous meeting held at the Metropolitan Opera House in this city, on the even of President Wilson's return to Paris, Mr. Taft illustrated the situation by the story of the man whose lawyer visited him in jail and asked him why he was there. When the man told him the fact, the lawyer replied, "Why, they can't put you in jail for that". To which the man replied, rather

forcibly, that he was there, just the same. Entangling alliances? The time to avoid them was when we were facing the question of participation in the war. We are intimately mixed up with the affairs of Europe; and simply for the reason that that which was a fact in 1797 is not a fact in 1919,—our interests are necessarily and naturally one with those of the nations of Europe.

The fourth reason given by Washington was the fact that we stood alone among the nations a representative of the principles of human liberty; that America was a democracy, while the other powers were monarchical; and we could not afford to take the risks involved in intimate association with governments of so opposite a type.

Here also, the reason is sound. Were the facts the same to-day, the advice would be good. Our President wisely sounded a note of caution in certain of his communications with the imperial government of Germany, to the effect that democratic nations could not have frank and confident dealings with autocratic governments. But does the fact remain? Was it mere emotion, blinding us to facts, which led us to hang up with the Stars and Stripes the banners of Great Britain, France, and Italy? Was it mere sentimentality that made us talk about "a war to make the world safe for democracy"? Having fought side by side with the great democratic nations,—some of them in certain very important respects more democratic than the United States of America,—are we now to revert to the judgment that was true in 1797, but has ceased to be true? Once more, it is a reason which has ceased to exist.

But the strongest plea Washington makes, the one which he urges with most solemn insistency, is that it is unwise to make permanent alliances, because that cause tends to excessive attachment to one nation or group of nations, and to unnatural antipathy toward other nations or groups.

Washington knew well whereof he spoke. During the last years of his life, while he was President, he had carried on a conflict harder in some ways, and more bitter, than the waging of the Revolutionary war. There was a strong party in this new country determined to commit us to an alliance with France against England. Washington saw the dangers of such a lining up of forces. One of the clearest marks of his sanity is his quick readiness to bring about friendly relations between America and England. It is safe to say that by far the greater part of the force leading him to urge so solemnly that we steer clear of entangling alliances was his fear that we should adopt a policy of permanent hostility toward England, our natural friend among the nations.

The very tendency Washington feared is still at work. Some of the strongest opposition to the League of Nations comes from the anti-British elements in our population. But in a far deeper way Washington's advice, instead of operating against American participation in the League, actually favors such participation. For here is a new sort of international agreement,—not an alignment with one nation and an antipathy toward another, but a coming together of all nations in a common working agreement. It is expressly planned to eliminate, so far as possible, group alliances, balances of power, and all the rest which Washington rightly feared. Here again, it is a strange phenomenon that some of the very men who oppose the League of Nations in the name of Washington, urge in place of it an alliance between America and Great Britain and France,—the very course against which Washington warned us!

Turn for a moment to President Monroe, and the doctrine that has made him famous. Again I assert that I do not see how any one can read that original message of James Monroe, and find in it reason for opposing the League of Nations.

We are given to light talk to the effect that the Monroe Doctrine means the paramountcy of suzerainty of the United States over the Western Hemisphere. It is partly because we have read into it such an insolent and impossible claim that the sensitive lands to the South of us regard our country with some suspicion and distrust.

The Monroe Doctrine was not at the start, and never has been, such a claim. It is a sufficient proof of that assertion to read the original message. It is a further proof, and a tremendous one, to realize that Canada is part of this hemisphere, and the United States would not dream of claiming any suzerainty over that vast dominion. We talk as if the Monroe Doctrine were the private property of the United States. If Canada is not concerned in it, the Monroe Doctrine is of no value. If Canada is concerned in it, then the Monroe Doctrine is a vital matter to the British Empire as well as to the United States, and Britain has been wise in putting back of it the force of her navy.

The fact is that Monroe sent out his defiant message after consultation with the British government, and with cordial though unofficial consent on its part. It was issued in the interests of democracy against the autocrats who aspired to control the world through the Holy Alliance. It was a simple assertion that the United States would stand for and guard the *territorial integrity* and the *democratic form of government* of all this hemisphere, so far as democratic government had been achieved here. This is what Monroe gives as his reason: "The political system of the allied powers is essentially different from that of America." "We should consider any attempt on their part to extend *their system* to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety."

The Covenant of the League of Nations proposes to extend *our* system, on which our American government is based,—free co-operation between self-governing com-

monwealths,—to the whole world; it proposes to make firm the territorial integrity and democratic government of every nation. How can any one quote Monroe as in opposition to such a plan?

There may be good reasons why America should not enter the League of Nations; but Washington's Farewell Address and the Monroe Doctrine are not among those reasons.

I should like to urge one weighty reason why the Covenant of the League should be adopted by the United States, but I can take time only to mention it. It is the fact that the League of Nations is so interwoven with the Peace Treaty that it is a hopeless task to remove it, and that its removal would leave the Peace Treaty in the condition of a bill enacted with the operating clause struck out.

Any one who has read through the voluminous draft of the Treaty or the excellent summary of it must have noticed how, again and again, practically at every important point where execution of the Treaty may prove difficult, or the understanding of its provisions be conflicting, the League of Nations is invoked as the solution of the difficulty. There are more than seventy such references in the Treaty. In fact the League is, in one point of view, the continuation of the Peace Conference with power to see its provisions carried into effect. I can see how those who think the Treaty unjust and unwise, and hope to see it changed or nullified, may want the League of Nations Covenant omitted. I can see that if any men in Germany are planning to sign the Peace Treaty as Trotzky signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, with the definite plan of failing to keep it, they would want above all to see the League of Nations defeated. But I do not see how any one who thinks the Treaty right on the whole, and hopes to see it adopted, can fail to support its plan for a League of Nations.

But I am speaking to-day, not of the possible arguments for the League, but of the unworthy reasons brought against it; and I must take time for but one more, and that by far the gravest, from the point of view of Christian thought and judgment.

Whatever arguments may be brought against the League, *no Christian has the slightest right to respect arguments based on the self-interest of America,* as opposed to the interests of the rest of the world.

Much of the opposition to the Covenant of the League of Nations is based on that argument, that it will not be to the advantage of America to enter such an international organization. Sometimes this is skilfully covered over, sometimes frankly avowed, sometimes it lies back in the subconsciousness of the opponent. I stand here to plead that it is an argument unworthy and un-Christion. It is the argument on which the Knox resolution is based.

Here our text comes into play. "We, who are strong, ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves." It is not strange that men without the Christ-vision, men accustomed to think in terms of self-advantage, should look at the enviable position of the United States with her wealth, her unexhausted resources, her demonstrated power, and say, "What a chance for greatness and domination!" That they should look at poverty-stricken, death-smitten Europe, chaotic Russia and Turkey, and needy Asia, and draw back in alarm from the risks and burdens and losses that close participation with the life of those lands must mean for the United States.

But it is inconceivable that the Christian should take that view, form that estimate, adopt that policy. I would not say that no one can be a Christian and yet oppose the League Covenant; such dogmatism would be absolutely indefensible. There may be good and valid arguments against the Covenant, which have a right to appeal

to Christian men and women and to influence largely their judgment and actions. But I do say that I cannot see how any one can be a Christian and let this particular argument have any weight; more than that, he should be led the more to favorable consideration of the League of Nations plan for the fact that it may involve the putting of the strength of America at the service of smaller nations and weaker peoples, because it may make us really a people with a mission, a Servant of the Lord, a nation great according to the Christian standard, of service done to the lowest for the sake of the Highest.

It is precisely because so much is made of this self-regarding argument by the opponents of the Covenant that Christians feel the more sure that their influence should be on the side of its adoption. For if there is anything sure about the religion of Christ, it is that it urges sacrifice as the very law of a life that would be righteous and happy. There is absolutely no way of making a nation a Christian nation save by setting it in the way of Christ's ideals and principles; and the call to stay out of a plan aiming to secure the peace of the world and to further friendly co-operation of nations, on the ground that participation in it may involve danger and loss for us, is a call no Christian should heed for an instant. To be moved by such an appeal is to confess one's self in the grip of an un-Christian spirit.

Grave issues are involved in this question of the action our country shall take on the Peace Treaty, and on the Covenant of the League of Nations as a part of it. It is a time for free discussion, for patience, for care; it is a time to avoid denunciation and dogmatism, and the imputation of base motives. For myself, I must say that after reading, and re-reading, and carefully studying, the proposed covenant, I cannot come to any conclusion other than that the welfare of mankind will be set forward decidedly by the ratification of the Covenant and the setting up of the proposed League of Nations, and that

the best interests of the race would be gravely if not fatally hurt by a failure to adopt it now. The alternatives are such as one cannot face without dread. We have seen what one Balkan situation can do; what will happen if we emerge from this war, as now seems probable, with some twenty separate nations where four were, with all the rivalries and intrigues which their close contiguity will inevitably produce, and with no organized judgment and power of the world to oversee their development, and to hold the upper hand for justice and the good of humanity?

Even if the critics of the Covenant are right in their judgments, if it is open to serious objection, if flaws can be found all through it, if the necessity of amendment is palpably plain, still we need to ask if it is not better to start with this than to risk chaos again. Objections just as weighty, fears just as potent, were voiced when our forefathers here in New York State came near failing to ratify the Federal Constitution one hundred thirty years ago. The wise words of John Jay apply as forcibly to the present situation as to that:

"Some", said he, "would be content with recommendatory amendments; others wish for explanatory ones to settle constructions which they think doubtful; others would not be satisfied with less than absolute and previous amendments; and I am mistaken if there be not a few who prefer a separation from the union to any national government whatever. . . . Let it be admitted that this plan, like everything else devised by man, has its imperfections; that it does not please everybody is certain, and there is little reason to expect one that will. It is a question of grave moment to you whether the probability of your being able to obtain a better is such as to render it prudent and advisable to reject this and run the risk."

We may well face with soberness, and with a certain reluctance mounting almost to fear, the thought of what

it may mean to America to take part in a League of Nations, to abandon her traditional policy of isolation, to take her part in settling the quarrels of other nations and races, to assume the burden of a needy and divided world. By all means let us count the cost, not going into the plan with eyes closed to the risks we must face and the burdens we must bear. But, men and women of the church of Christ, calling ourselves Christians, have we counted the cost of *staying out* of this new and daring scheme; the casting down of the fair hopes of men for a better order; the loss of the opportunity for a free course for justice, peace, and comfort for great masses of men; the one chance of escaping from the intolerable load of competitive armament; the one reasonable assurance against a dangerous league of nations under the secret domination of the very forces, or forces like those, that brought on the war out of which we are just staggering, carrying our dead and our burdens of debt? There may be good arguments why America should stay out of the League of Nations and thereby condemn it to futility. If so, we should heed them. But the arguments I have heard so far are not good, not worthy of the respect of any Christian; they arise from a misreading of American ideals, and a rejection of Christian ideals.

Every patriot dreams dreams of the future greatness and glory of his country. He longs to see her high among the nations. But there is a vision that should claim the heart and fire the imagination of the Christian patriot, far nobler than that of any glory or greatness of outward prestige and prosperity. It is the vision of a country great in courage, great in daring, great in ideals, great in confidence in all men and races and nations, great in sacrifice, great in service, great in the ways of Christ and His cross. There is a magnificent phrase found in the Old Testament: "*Great unto God.*" That is what we would have America be, great unto God! That means clearly that America shall stand ready and eager

to assume all the risks and burdens and changes involved in playing her full part in international co-operation, in world-organization. It means that she gladly set her hand to the plan for a League of Nations, so felicitously called, not a Constitution, but a "Covenant",—a word with a deep religious flavor to all who love the Bible, most of all to Presbyterians who recall the "Solemn League and Covenant" that marked the downfall of the tyranny of the Stuarts in Scotland and England. It means that she stand ready to act as mandatary under the League for some of the new nations, if they desire it, repeating the fine work done in the Philippines. It means that she reveal herself clearly to the world as a nation caring more for the good of humanity than for her own power and prestige and prosperity, a nation which holds all its resources at the service of those who need them without thought of reward, or overmuch counting of the cost.

"So runs our loyal dream of thee.
God of our fathers! Make it true."

"Happy is the people that is in such a case. Yea, happy is the people whose God is the Lord", and whose way is the way of Christ, choosing not to be ministered unto, but to minister; not to rule over others, but to serve them in love for Christ's sake, valuing their strength most of all as a means of great service freely rendered to all mankind.